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ABSTRACT

Since 1975, when a federal task force first recommended educating mildly and moderately disabled students in the regular classroom, support has grown for full inclusion of all students in the mainstream. West Feliciana Parish (Louisiana), a poor rural school district in which all students are designated at-risk, has successfully integrated all elementary students into regular classrooms and has integrated secondary students into vocational and community-based instructional programs, as needed. Special education professionals serve as consultants to aid classroom teachers in meeting the needs of all students so that every child experiences optimal learning, is valued and respected, and has maximum interaction with peers. Since the program began, identification of special education students and elementary-level discipline referrals have decreased, standardized test scores have increased, and many students from private school settings have enrolled in the public schools. A model of how to conceptualize, plan, and implement systemic change such as full inclusion is presented and applied to the case of West Feliciana, focusing on the role of the superintendent in developing and communicating the vision, planning and providing resources, providing training and development, monitoring progress, continuing to give assistance, and creating an atmosphere and culture for change. (SV)

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STRATEGIES FOR SPECIAL EDUCATION INCLUSION IN GENERAL EDUCATION: IMPLICATIONS FOR RURAL SCHOOLS

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Introduction

Few issues in special education currently generate more discussion, confusion or apprehension than the topic of "full inclusion." Despite the controversy and debate surrounding this issue, political and other pressures are moving the nation in the direction of serving disabled and other at-risk students in the mainstream ("Disability Groups Send," 1992; National Association of School Boards of Education, 1992).

Although momentum for full inclusion is strengthening, major concerns still remain. The Education for All Handicapped Children Act of 1975 (PL 94-142) embraces two hallmark components. They are exemplified by the now familiar phrases, "free, appropriate public education" and "least restrictive environment." Full inclusion is clearly a movement that addresses the second component. However, the issue of appropriateness remains a major concern. Research findings on the efficacy of different placement options are varied. However, it is certain that, "unless adaptations occur in regular education, there is little likelihood that students being returned to the mainstream will be any more successful than they were before the advent of special classes" (Stainback & Stainback, 1989, p. 49).

The concern about supplying appropriate services to fully mainstreamed students with disabilities is particularly acute in rural areas where financial, human, and community resources, as well as other support services, are often scarce. This paper will address issues confronting rural schools as they grapple with the complexities of full inclusion. A support for full inclusion will be presented, along with a description of a rural school district that has adopted this philosophy. Finally, a model for planning and implementing a full inclusion approach to special education service delivery of will be outlined.

Rural Schools and Special Education

Two thirds of all school districts and one third of all students in America are rural (Helge, 1990). "Nearly 80 percent of the nation's school districts have fewer than 3,000 pupils" ("Rural districts dominate," 1991). Numerous factors have a negative impact on many rural communities. Howley (1991) suggests that among them are :

- decreased amounts of government funds coming into rural communities as compared to urban areas;
- geographic barriers affecting isolation;
- specialized economies as the primary financial base of rural communities increasing economic instability;
- small scale of businesses and services adversely affecting educational quality.

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Additional factors impinging upon special education services in rural schools, include "community attitudes (e.g., limited expectations regarding achievement of those with disabilities . . .); the 'mystification' of special education; . . . inadequate facilities, equipment, and materials . . ." (Helge, 1986). Inadequate services (e.g., medical, social, psychological, etc.) are also more common in rural communities (Helge, 1990). It is often more expensive to serve students with disabilities in rural areas because of additional transportation and professional service costs (Helge, 1984). Further, the perennial problem of recruiting and retaining teachers and other specialists to remote, rural communities is problematic. This is especially true of services for low-incidence disabilities (Berkeley & Ludlow, 1991). As a result of these and other factors, it is apparent that it is often not easy for rural school districts, alone or cooperatively with neighboring districts, to meet the educational demands of students with disabilities.

A Case for Greater Inclusion

Historical support for inclusion: Reynolds (1988) uses the term "progressive inclusion" to describe the evolution of services to those with various disabilities. He and others (e.g., Stainback, Stainback, & Bunch, 1989) point out that as the United States emerged as a country, no educational services were available to the disabled. In the early 1800's, residential institutions, or "asylums," began to emerge to accommodate those with hearing, visual, mental or emotional impairments. Although access to those services was far from universal, such institutions remained the primary educational option for the disabled until day schools and special classes came into fashion in the early 1900's. These allowed greater, more localized access.

During the 1950's - 60's, parents of children with disabilities began to organize and to pressure courts and legislatures for changes in educational services available to their children. They sought access to public schools as an issue of civil rights for the disabled. Among the results of these efforts was PL 94-142, which mandated a free, appropriate public education for all handicapped children to be provided in the least restrictive environment. As a result, resource rooms and self-contained classrooms appeared in public schools everywhere.

In 1986, Madeleine Will, then-Assistant Secretary for the Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services, published a report regarding the status of special education programs since the implementation of PL 94-142. Her task force proposed what has been called the Regular Education Initiative. Citing concerns about some unintended negative effects of special education "pull-out" programs, their proposal suggested that greater efforts to educate mildly and moderately disabled students in the mainstream of regular education should be pursued (Will, 1986). Since then, support has grown for all students, even those with severe and profound disabilities, to be educated in the same classrooms as the nondisabled.

Perspectives of inclusion: In the relevant research and professional literature, the proponents and opponents of inclusion have become more apparent. According to Skrtic (1991), both sides agree that the only justifiable, rational reason for special education is to provide instructional benefit to students with disabilities. Yet, "there is now substantial evidence that most, if not all, children with

disabilities, including children with very severe disabilities, can be educated appropriately without isolation from peers who do not have disabilities" (Ringer & Kerr, 1988, p. 6).

> Given the weak effects of special education instructional practices and the social and psychological costs of labeling, the current system of special education is, at best, no more justifiable than simply permitting most students to remain unidentified in regular classrooms and, at worst, far less justifiable than regular classroom placement in conjunction with appropriate in-class support services. (Skrtic, 1991)

However, not all proponents of inclusion support "full inclusion." Skrtic (1991) suggests that inclusion proponents fall into four camps. The differences among these groups center upon degree of inclusion. At one end of the spectrum are those who espouse the position of full inclusion for mildly handicapped children, while maintaining separate educational options for those with moderate, severe or profound disabilities. Others support the full inclusion of those with mild and moderate disabilities. Some propose that, for the most part, only the profoundly disabled should educated outside the mainstream. The fourth position supports the full inclusion of all those with disabilities.

A Case Study of Rural Special Education Inclusion (information about the case study comes largely from Jolly, Foster, & Sullivan, 1992; and West Feliciana Parish Schools, 1992)

Background: West Feliciana Parish is a rural Louisiana parish located approximately 35 miles north of Baton Rouge along the Mississippi River. The parish is home for about 12,000 people. The economy revolves around agriculture-related businesses, a prison, a large paper plant, and a nuclear power plant.

The school system serves approximately 2,100 students in four schools (three elementary schools serving 1,200 students, and a consolidated junior high/high school). Ninety-eight percent of the students are bused to and from their schools; for some the ride is as long as an hour and a half each way. About 52 percent are White non-Hispanic and 48 percent are Black.

Of the sixty-four parishes in Louisiana, West Feliciana ranks sixtieth in per capita income. Unemployment is high (10.1 percent). Fifty-five percent of the students participate in a free or reduced lunch program, and approximately 30 percent come from very low-socieconomic level conditions. The administrators of the school system have defined all children in the parish as at risk.

In an attempt to meet the educationally related needs of these at-risk students, an array of services were planned and initiated. The overall impact of these services was to identify vulnerable families and students and provide a "safety net" for them. The philosophy of these Safety Net programs is that, by ensuring all student needs having been addressed, the success of the school will be assured, and the need for corrective or remedial efforts later on will be reduced. Each school in the parish became involved in developing and delivering programs that fit the needs of all students.

Overall program description: Safety Net is different from traditional school philosophies in that it is oriented toward prevention and intervention services through health, self-concept, self-esteem, and self-efficacy programs. In addition,

curriculum realignment assures appropriate cognitive (academic) programs at all levels for all students. The focus is on child advocacy and preventive early intervention.

Because of West Feliciana Parish's focus on the total child, other agencies collaborate with the school through interagency agreements, providing services to students and families at the school site. The Office of Public Health, the Offices of Mental Health and Substance Abuse, the Louisiana State University College of Education, the Louisiana State University School of Medicine and the Tulane School of Medicine are involved.

Inclusion description: In West Feliciana Parish, Chapter I and special education students are integrated into regular classrooms. At the secondary level, students are also integrated into vocational and community-based instructional programs, as needed. Special education professionals serve as consultants to aid classroom teachers in meeting the needs of all students so that, whether disabled or not: "each child experiences optimal learning; each child is valued and respected; each child is provided age-appropriate physical, functional, social and societal programming for maximum interaction with peers at school and in our communities" (*Integrated Program*, 1992, p. 2). Time has been built into the weekly schedule for special education staff, Chapter I staff, paraprofessionals and regular education staff to consult/collaborate. Discipline is maintained through schoolwide discipline programs. Counseling and other in-house intervention alternatives are proactive, enabling students to assume greater autonomy and responsibility while phasing out of support.

Effectiveness: Since the Safety Net program, the parish has seen a 23 percent decrease in the number of identified special education students and a 50 percent decrease in the number of discipline referrals to principals in pre-kindergarten through sixth grade. All elementary-level regular-class students passed the LEAP test (state-mandated testing) and 97 percent of the special education students were promoted to the next grade. In 1990, 36.3 percent of the first through ninth grade students scored above the national median in reading. In 1992, 45.9 percent scored above the national median. And in mathematics 43.4 percent of the students in the first through ninth grades scored above the national median in 1990. In 1992 the number who scored above the national median in mathematics jumped to 54 percent. An additional, somewhat parenthetical measure of effectiveness is that there is a significant in-migration into the district. More than 400 new students have enrolled in the parish schools since these efforts began; many have come from private school settings.

Funding: The Safety Net program has been developed and implemented largely through "creative rearranging" of funding already being received by the district. Funding waivers were negotiated to pool special education, compensatory education, Chapter I, and other funds in order to provide integrated services in regular classrooms. Some of the initial finances have come from a sizable school fund surplus arising from the building of a local power plant. From these funds a new school housing, among other things, the new pre-kindergarten program and the Family Service Center. Other expenses are shared through cooperative agreements

with various local and state agencies. West Feliciana Parish was also awarded a two-year grant of $165,000 by the BellSouth Foundation (a private foundation) in 1992 to expand and evaluate the program.

Staffing and staff development: As a result of the magnitude and scope of changes being planned for and implemented, a much larger than usual staff turnover rate occurred. Personnel selections for these positions have been based upon expertise and ability rather than seniority. Many leadership positions have been filled by personnel from outside the district rather than the usual tradition of administrative underlings "moving up." Also, because of a cooperative agreement with Louisiana State University College of education, one of the elementary schools is a designated professional development center for pre-service teachers. This enhances opportunities to select new teachers who work well in an inclusive environment.

Staff development needs were also apparent. Many teachers in the parish had previously tended to focus only upon the middle range of their classroom populations. Staff development opportunities were minimal and fragmented. Today, staff development is ongoing, with particular focus upon the development of necessary attitudes, commitment and competencies required to work effectively with diverse student needs. A needs-assessment-driven, teacher-friendly staff development program is in place. More teacher input goes into the selection of in-service topics. In-class demonstrations and coaching are also used to translate research and theory into practice.

Planning and implementation process for inclusion: The Safety Net program fundamentally has been a restructuring effort. It has involved changes in educational philosophy and attitudes; the service delivery structure has been reconfigured from two parallel services (regular and special education) to one integrated system; faculty and staff roles/relationships have also been reshaped. Interagency collaborations and added programs have also been included. Negotiations with the state department of education for various waivers have been pursued. Therefore, it was necessary to plan carefully and to implement programs in stages.

Planning began in the summer of 1989 when the new superintendent, responding to a mandate from his local school board to improve the quality of instruction, convened a committee of forty people, composed of teachers, parents, administrators, community leaders, and school board members, to work through a strategic planning process to develop a 5-year parish plan. Their mission statement declared: "As part of our restructuring and enhancement of service models, all students are valued and respected, and it is expected that all children can and will learn."

By applying and receiving state funding, a new pre-kindergarten program was initiated for all four-year-old children in the parish, including those with disabilities. This began the gradual adoption of full inclusion for all students over the next five years. The second year, after opportunities for observation, discussion, staff development, leadership selection, provision of resources (human, time and financial) and community awareness activities, pull-out and self-contained programs were phased out of the elementary schools, and students with disabilities were integrated into regular classrooms. Full inclusion was incorporated at the

junior high school level the following year. By the end of the fifth year, it is anticipated that all students in the parish school system, regardless of their educational needs, will be in regular classrooms.

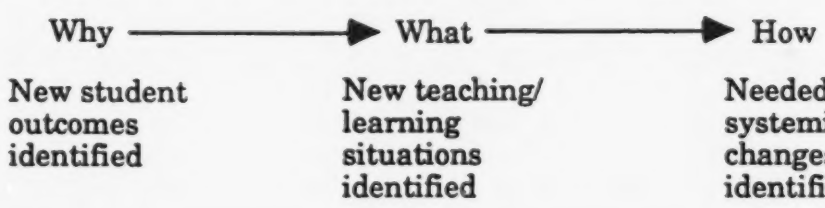
A Model to Consider When Moving Toward Inclusion

The concept of full inclusion is not new. Various special education service delivery configurations and considerations for mainstream classes, even for those with very severe disabilities in rural schools, are available in the literature (Zeph, 1983; Helge, 1986; Ayres & Meyer, 1992). Issues such as team teaching, consultative support, use of paraprofessionals and peers as tutors, cooperative learning approaches and numerous other ideas have been discussed and are available in the professional literature to those seeking them out.

The broader issue is how to conceptualize, plan for and implement systemic change such as the adoption of full inclusion. Hord (1992, p. 59) emphasizes "that the *why* (outcomes) of improving schools precedes the *what* and the *how* and that the *why* should be embedded firmly in student outcomes." Corbett and Blum (1992) suggest community-wide participation in identifying these student outcomes.

Once the outcomes have been identified, "the next step is to consider and design teaching/learning situations that will produce the desired outcomes" (Hord, 1992, p. 60). The third step, then, is a determination of how the current system must change in order to accommodate and facilitate these new teaching/learning situations (Hord, 1992).

Figure 1



For school improvement to occur, it is important to understand that constructive change takes leadership. Plans do not get implemented because they have been mandated or because teachers are well-intentioned. Change must be facilitated. Rutherford and his collegues (1983) found that school leaders who were successful in realizing school improvement "work[ed] intensely with brute persistence to attain their vision" (p. 113).

The process delineated in Figure 1 is somewhat simplistic. It does not identify how school leaders go about the "business" of restructuring. Hord (1992, p. 31), in her synthesis of research on what leaders do to facilitate school change, suggests a six-component framework that outlines what successful school leaders do to facilitate change. The six components are:

- Developing and communicating the vision
- Planning and providing resources
- Providing training and development
- Monitoring and checking progress

- Continuing to give assistance
- Creating an atmosphere and culture for change

Vision: It is important for school leaders to have a clear picture of what a proposed change "looks like" before they attempt to develop programs. When considering the issue of full inclusion, this involves more than simply envisioning students with disabilities in regular classrooms. Indeed, these images frequently elicit feelings of dismay, bewilderment, concern and fear in parents, teachers, special educators and others. A vision of full inclusion must include the educational success of all students in each classroom. Once the vision is clear, it is easier to recognize what needs to occur to make the vision a reality.

However, it is not enough for a school leader ,or even a leadership team, to have a clear vision of their ideal school. This vision must become a vision that is shared by those entrusted with making the vision a reality. Teachers (regular and special), parents, administrators, those who provide various related services, and others must also envision the change and "buy into" it.

Resources: Time, money, building space, manpower and other resources needed to achieve a successful change effort must be identified and provided. This may involve various political interactions at the local, state and federal levels to find or arrange for these resources.

Training: When systemic change involves shifting roles, relationships and rules by which staff and others function, staff development is crucial. For full inclusion, regular classroom teachers must expand teaching capacities to meet the needs of all students in the classroom. Special education teachers will be providing more consulting and less direct instruction. Team-teaching will be more common. These and other changes in personnel behavior require staff development.

Monitoring: To achieve the desired change, periodic, ongoing monitoring and assessment of change efforts is important. Based on the monitoring results, modifications to the improvement plan will be undertaken.

Continued assistance: Providing resources and staff development are not one-shot, up-front events. Based on monitoring and other information, additional human, financial, time, staff development and/or other resources will be necessary. Change is not an event, it is a process requiring continuing assistance to achieve the desired results.

School culture: According to Boyd (1992, p. 27), school culture is the "interplay between three factors: the attitudes and beliefs of persons inside the school and in the external environment, the cultural norms of the school and the relationships between persons in the school." In many ways the school's culture will be the "make it or break it" factor in the success of school improvement efforts. "The attitudes and beliefs of those in the school create mental models of what schooling is and how others in the school should and will respond to events and actions. It is from these attitudes and beliefs that the culture of the school is created" (Boyd, 1992, p. 29). It is important for school leaders to be aware of the attitudes, beliefs,

and cultural norms of their schools and communities. In this way allies may be identified, opposition may be minimized, and change may be facilitated.

Successful school leaders also foster and develop school cultures that will facilitate change. Boyd (1992), in her synthesis of the professional literature regarding the contextual factors that impact school improvement efforts, suggests at least four cultural school norms that appear to facilitate the success of school improvement efforts. These are a norm of critical inquiry (maintaining an atmosphere where constructive criticism is sought and welcomed), a norm of continuous improvement (when problems arise, resources and training are sought and provided to resolve them), a norm of a widely shared vision (developing of a sense of purpose that is shared by parents, students, teachers, staff, administrators), and a norm of wide involvement in making decisions (paraticipating in decision-making by those affected by the change effort is essential to the success of that effort).

The Model Applied to the Case Study

It is difficult within the parameters of this paper to develop fully a model of change such as that which is proposed above. Nor is is feasible to identify and categorize within this framework all activities undertaken by the school district leadership in their full inclusion change efforts. However, some of the important activities undertaken during the planning and implementation stages of the systemic restructuring efforts are outlined below.

Facilitating leadership: The superintendent has been the primary leader of change for the parish's Safety Net efforts. With the strong support of his local school board, he has also sought out, hired and/or developed the leadership needed for the various Safety Net programs or schools, including full inclusion.

Developing and communicating the vision:

- The superintendent convened a 40-member committee, including teachers, parents, community leaders, school board members, administrators for strategic planning to develop a mission, vision and 5-year improvement plan.
- The superintendent has hired energetic, enthusiastic, competent people to head and promote the various Safety Net programs.

Planning and providing resources:

- The superintendent negotiated with state officials to "pool" various funds for specific categories of students to provide services to all students in regular classrooms.
- The superintendent negotiated with the school board to build a pre-kindergarten/Family Outreach school rather than a new middle school.
- School schedules were restructured to provide time for teachers to collaborate.
- Interagency agreements were negotiated to provide various social services to students and families in the schools.

Providing training and development:

- Staff development covering numerous issues have been provided.
- Monitoring and coaching of teachers in classrooms have been provided.

- A pre-service teacher preparation program is located in one of the inclusion schools, thereby providing a pool of new-teachers who are already trained in fully integrated classrooms.

Monitoring and checking progress:

- A full array of data is collected on student outcomes.

Continuing to give assistance:

- Faculty and administration input is solicited for future training needs based on observations/experiences.
- Grants are constantly being sought to provide financial resources to continue the Safety Net programs.

Creating an atmosphere and culture for change:

- Through the wise selection of influential and strategic people to be members of the planning team, a strong support base for the proposed changes was established.
- Community meetings helped to minimize external resistance.
- Strategic selection of program and school leaders fostered support for the school improvement efforts.
- Resistors of the changes were encouraged to leave; others were reassigned.
- As opponents to the change efforts left the school district, they were replaced by those who were more supportive.
- Collaborative opportunities have been provided and encouraged.
- School improvement efforts have been highlighted at conferences by school staff.
- Improvement efforts have been celebrated; staff have been honored.
- The leadership style of the new superintendent is one of fostering wide involvement of staff in decision-making.

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